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A rare singer rises from Cherry Hill

By David Patrick Stearns
Inquirer Music Critic

More than most current opera singers, Lawrence Zazzo knows about being a stranger in his own country. The irony is that, in the specialized corner of the music world reserved for countertenors, this particular one from Cherry Hill couldn't be in a luckier position for a nice career leap.



MARTY SOHL / Metropolitan Opera

Countertenor Lawrence Zazzo, making his Metropolitan Opera debut as Ptolemy in Handel's "Giulio Cesare." Zazzo will take over the title role next week. [A» More images](#)

All he has to do, in his first U.S. engagement in five years - one that's also his Metropolitan Opera debut, in a revival of Handel's *Giulio Cesare* - is sing the way he has for years in Europe, and not trip over the Met's 15-foot capes.

That last part isn't so easy. "They're tricky. I don't use capes often. It's an acquired skill," Zazzo, 36, said the other day in a Manhattan cafe after singing the role of Ptolemy the night before. "There's greater emphasis in Europe on filmic acting and psychological process than good old-fashioned stagecraft with shields and swords."

Still, the psychological stuff is handy in emergencies. "The other night I slipped off the platform and twisted my ankle. I put some ice on it, and then when I got up to sing my second aria, I noticed that it was sprained. So I was limping around onstage, thinking of how to work it into my character. Do I make him like Richard III?"

As it is, his Ptolemy is easily the production's most physical characterization. Zazzo charges around the stage like the 13-year-old brat that Ptolemy is, but with a sexually charged evil streak that's telegraphed by his jutting jaw and cobra-like gold lamé collar, behind which trail not one but two capes.

The voice is as firm as any countertenor singing today, and Zazzo uses it vigorously. Nonetheless, his debut was barely mentioned in some reviews: In the political chess game that ends in Cleopatra's death, Ptolemy has little stage time - and even less in this production, since two of his four arias are cut.

Ptolemy, however is serving as the "farm team" role for that of Julius Caesar, which Zazzo will take over from the better-established David Daniels on Tuesday and Friday next week. Originally, that wasn't part of the deal. But the death last year of Lorraine Hunt Lieberson left the Met's forthcoming *Orfeo ed Euridice* without a star in the transgender title role of Orpheus, and Daniels was drafted. Those last two *Cesare* performances feature the sexy, new-in-town soprano Danielle de Niese as Cleopatra, which will bring back the critics. Then, Zazzo will sing the title role with experience of projecting in that large theater but without opening-night stress.

Adding to that is the critical mass that his career has reached in Europe. He has a dozen recordings out - from Scarlatti's *Griselda* to Handel's *Messiah* - all beautifully packaged, well-promoted releases on Harmonia Mundi, conducted by the celebrated, controversial Rene Jacobs. In February, Virgin Classics released the world-premiere recording of Handel's *Fernando* with Zazzo in the title role. Last weekend on France Musique's Web radio, he was heard singing the title role in Handel's *Riccardo Primo*.

This fall, the Landor label will release his first solo album, Elizabethan-era William Byrd songs accompanied by, of all things, saxophone quartet. Titled *Byrdland*, the project sounds nonsensical. But early mixes show that the saxophone playing is so refined purists will expect the worst and be surprised to hear performances wrought with sincerity.

"It sounds like a crazy idea. But they believe in me," Zazzo says. "We went to a farmhouse in East Suffolk, no cell phone reception, just a big barn that was a studio. . . . I had to teach the style from the beginning. They had no sense of how to do the music. But they have fantastic ensemble sound." And how could it not attract attention?

Maybe all this means Zazzo will get his wish to work more in the United States - although that can be a mixed blessing. Until the last decade, countertenors couldn't make good



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money here, and the United States still lags behind Europe. With rare exceptions (like Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*), baroque operas are the only option, and larger American theaters - with louder, non-specialist instruments in the pit - put a greater burden on singers.

Then there's the time factor. The Met's *Cesare* rehearsed for three weeks; Zazzo is used to six. And though he can't say enough about how well the Met has treated him, he notes gently, "This music needs extra time. It needs special handling."

The big question is: How did anything as special as Zazzo emerge from Cherry Hill? Son of a physician, he was always one of the smartest kids in the class, and went to Yale as an English major. But even his boyhood buddy Ravi Goel - now a doctor at the Wills Eye Institute - wouldn't have predicted a music career.

"I didn't know what a countertenor was until he told me he was going to be one," Goel said. "It was pretty bold. In Cherry Hill, kids go to medical school, law school and Wall Street, in that order."

Countertenors are such an unusual voice type that few aspire to become one, Zazzo included. But he has always loved performing, even enjoying a brief career as a party magician named the Great Zazzini. He also sang in the Philadelphia Boys Choir until his voice broke.

"And when I came back to singing, I still had this alto voice. . . . It had become my falsetto," he says.

After that, he began singing along to recordings of the celebrated English choir the King's Singers, which has male altos. "In madrigals and barbershop quartet, I sang baritone," he recalls. "But I never felt as comfortable singing as I do in falsetto. With countertenors, when they find that voice, it's the right one for them. They aren't just failed baritones. It's where they should be."

A Yale-sponsored scholarship to study in England landed him at the Royal College of Music in Cambridge, the home territory of his beloved King's Singers. But fate had better plans: He was cast in a student production of Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

"It wasn't a leap," he says of his singing career. "It was kind of a stumble. I wanted to be an English professor, a musicologist and a choral conductor. I hadn't been on the stage in a theatrical piece since *Jack in the Beanstalk!* I grew up not really liking opera. I heard a lot of wobble. It felt ungentle to me. Then at the first rehearsal, singing Oberon felt completely natural. I had an idea of what I wanted to do, what felt right and how the character works."

That's also where he met his wife, Giselle Allen, a U.K.-based soprano and perhaps the best reason he's based in Europe.

Years of saying "let's try this for now" turned into a key mentoring relationship with conductor Jacobs, himself a former countertenor and the source of many stamina-preserving tips. Jacobs is also a conductor who rejects received wisdom and rarely allowed Zazzo to remain in his comfort zone.

Zazzo believes in Jacobs implicitly, but there is still a risk. Many countertenors wear out their voices in a few seasons; nobody is sure what hurts them.

That's the small but ever-present cloud shadowing the marvelous balance of Zazzo's life. He lives with his wife and daughter in County Antrim, Northern Ireland. The couple has strict rules on work-related absence. She often sings in Toronto, and when he's home playing house husband, the vocal rest and added preparation time couldn't be healthier.

And yet, "the jury is out on all of us," he says. "It seems that countertenors have shorter careers, but nobody really knows. I think a lot of countertenors who went into opera weren't really trained. My generation is the first that's prepared for doing opera. That has a lot to do with the longevity."

"I hope we're singing in our 50s and 60s. When you're singing baroque music, there's nothing better for the voice."

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